

SEANKELLY

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BROOKLYN RAIL

Landon Metz's New Paintings

Landon Metz has become known for his elegant stained-canvas works featuring an increasingly spare vocabulary of biomorphic forms splayed across the picture plane. Recently these paintings have progressed to a new place that stunningly extends and redefines his already significant achievement. In his latest series Metz isolated forms from earlier works, which he blows up to an epic scale and executes as large-scale monochromes, having irregular stretchers specially fabricated and thinking to an unprecedented degree about their display in relation to the architecture of the exhibition space.



Installation view: *Landon Metz*, James Fuentes Gallery, New York. Courtesy the artist and James Fuentes.

This concern with installation has its origins in Metz's exhibition last year at Retrospective Gallery in Hudson, New York. There he installed rectilinear canvases in carefully selected groupings that emphasized the interaction of the depicted forms with the space: a small house. For example, a vertical sequence of canvases, where the same form progressed downward as the viewer walked down from the first to the ground floor of the home in which the show was installed. This filmic experience was expanded by the larger canvases in a back room, which progressed around the room, and off the wall, breaking up the viewer's passage from one part of the house to another. In all cases the experience was lyrical, with the forms progressing steadily, but assuredly across their canvas containers like fish darting around a pond.

Metz expanded this investigation on a more monumental scale later that year as part of a residency at the ADN Collection in Bolzano, Italy. After closing that show, and having taken

the work to an unprecedented size, it makes sense that the artist would have felt as if the forms on his canvases desired to be liberated and allowed to more freely interact with the space in which they are installed. So when he returned to New York last fall Metz began conceiving of shaped canvas versions of his forms. Preferring to isolate certain established elements of his pictorial vocabulary, rather than inventing new ones. The result has added a surprising degree of complexity, and undoubtedly introduced a new direction in the work.

As a case in point, entering Metz's show at James Fuentes last winter and spring, practically the first thing one saw, even before proceeding past the front desk into the gallery proper, was a blue slab that mimed the thickness and dimension of the white wall in front of which it sat. This was the edge of one of Metz's paintings; and, not yet having progressed into the formal space of the exhibition, one was already confronted with two markedly painted entities—one a canvas, the other a wall—from a perspective where both of them could, conceivably, be parts of the same thing.

In this way, from the very beginning, and without much fanfare and self-conscious staging, we find that we were made aware of an aspect of the exhibition space that we wouldn't normally consider—the paintedness of the gallery's walls—and also of an element of the paintings that, similarly, we might otherwise overlook: their palpable, material thickness. Not so much an example of institutional critique, for this is far too painterly and direct a statement to amount to much of an explicitly politicized gesture, I mention this curious, and possibly unwitting, framing of the exhibition as just the first of many examples of dualities, inversions, and redistributions of emphasis enacted by Metz's new large-scale shaped canvases, which he continued to progress in an exhibition at Andersen's, Copenhagen this summer.

In these Metz has tightened the formal and technical terms established in the work he exhibited at Fuentes. Not only are the color fields more even, and the stretching more exact, but so too has the form that Metz rendered in a number of two part canvases become tighter. The languid unfolding of the three horizontal paintings at Fuentes has progressed in the few intervening months to become the elegant, floating semicircles at Andersen's. They resemble the thick, shaped lead and oil stick works that Richard Serra has made periodically since the 1970s, and which he has also installed around corners, emphasizing the object's place and interaction with architecture. In terms of architectural painting, Metz's work is also evocative of the wall works pursued by Blinky Palermo, and the irregular masonite paintings of Imi Knoebel. That Metz is progressing so quickly through the evolution and refinement of a striking pictorial language is enough to warrant our attention to these recent developments, and their impressive aesthetic impact is confirmation of the urgency of performing this assessment.

Entering the Fuentes space we realized that this is the side of an expansive, biomorphically-shaped monochrome painting, three of which encircle us as we move out towards the center of Fuentes's white cube space. Walking around and spending time with the twenty-foot-long canvases Metz has installed throughout the gallery, we come to realize that each of the six surfaces we encounter is one of two segments that make up a single shape, which is derived from a motif Metz arrived at in earlier work. In several cases the sections are physically separated from one another by the architecture of the gallery, via its doorways. In a way, then, no shape is given to us entirely, we can only piece it together in our mind. However, this abstract knowledge is juxtaposed with the very concrete experience of these sizeable panels jutting out of the wall, with a profile the thickness of which is unprecedented in Metz's practice.

Similarly, there is both the possibility of being optically immersed in each canvas's outsized color field, when we are up close to it, as it eclipses our gaze; and, when we are proximate enough, that optical experience is joined by a tactile one, as we hone in on what turn out to be the many material variations and eccentricities contained within each painting. This, in

turn, is a level of physical “content” that is also unprecedented in Metz’s practice. Some of the things a viewer might notice include: the pulls of thread that aggregate into clumps on the painting’s surface as the result of Metz spreading around thinned washes of paint to form a monochrome field; the various degrees of coloristic saturation within that field, the creases and folds along the edge of the painting that resulted from the challenge posed by stretching the canvas over the particularly eccentric curves of the stretchers Metz has specially-made; and finally, the physical relationship between each panel, determined by the architecture of the gallery, as they either join along its corners, or are distanced by its doorways.

All of these characteristics give the works a resolutely hand-made quality and a corresponding visual dynamism and life. The artist ambitiously took on a scale that would not, given his working with thinned pigment, have allowed for perfection. As such, the resulting marks and effects are only those that are necessary to the realization of such work. They add up nicely in the overall effect of beholding these canvases, since they are clearly the result of labor—of the hard-won effort put into completing these paintings—rather than coy marks left in as evidence of process.

Indeed, one could say that our experience of this exhibition—and it must be said that the sensation we are left with is much more an overall one, rather than one of each individual canvas on its own—is as of, on the one hand, dualism and, on the other, of a slow unfolding of perception, and in the process an expanding and deepening of it. This last is also both at an immediate, direct level—what is seen with the eyes and felt with the body—and in terms of our processing of that sensory data into the recognition of certain issues, many of these having to do with the dualities at play, such as pure versus complex color, materiality versus opticality, part versus whole, and so on.

All this serves to update another primary concern of Metz’s, the movement of the viewer in the space he or she shares with the paintings, which Metz affects, but does not control, in the lyrical play established by his biomorphic formal language. This was introduced in his solo exhibition last year at Retrospective. There he had the domestic architecture of a small house to engage with, while at Fuentes he had to take on the purported neutrality of the white cube. These shaped canvases serve to activate it by triangulating the viewer through the course he or she charts through it, which the canvases mediate and influence, for example through the various optical and physical experiences they elicit, some of which I have already catalogued.

The lyrical speed of looking at, and moving around, Metz’s paintings, which I see as central to his painterly achievement, both here and in past work, is enabled not only by the biomorphic forms, but also due to the spacing and sequencing of the canvases. Some appear to race towards one another, while others seem splayed out, as if desperate to separate from one another. These effects correspond, in the case of the former, to those works where the two panels abut, as in those located at the corners, which generate a corresponding sense of compactness, while the latter occurs when the two panels are separated by a doorway.

We might conclude, then, along the lines of this variability in the speed of looking so characteristic of Metz’s work, with a reference to one of the artist’s historical touchstones in Color Field painting, Morris Louis. While several commentators on Louis’s seminal Unfurled paintings have noted how the central expanse of raw canvas can seem to bulge forward, Metz’s presentation seems to draw (likely unconsciously) from another reading of those paintings, this by Donald Judd, who wrote of a sense of changing velocity that Louis’s paintings solicit from us as our eyes pass across them: “The surface widens quietly from each plain corner to the middle and is taut and quick along the bisecting diagonal.” The main difference being, of course, that Metz accomplishes within multiple, shaped panels, an extension, marrying optical and phenomenological registers, of something suggested

visually in Louis's singular rectangles. Of Metz's recent work we might thus also conclude, as Judd does of Louis's at Andre Emmerich in 1962, that he has "produced an unusual quality in [his] work. The quality is simply new. It may be lyrical, sensuous and tense, but so in a new context, one unallusive, direct, dry and unideal."